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Guidance for Preventing the Spread of H1N1 Influenza in the Workplace

Date: August 12, 2009
To: All Workplaces
From: Director of Health, David R. Gifford, MD, MPH
Re: Guidance for preventing spread of H1N1 in the workplace

Employers should be familiar with simple measures to reduce the risk of infection in the workplace and prepare for the impact of illness on their operations.

How can I reduce the risk of illness in the workplace?

Most importantly, remind employees with flu-like symptoms (fever and cough or fever and sore throat) that they should not come to work until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100°F/37.8°C) or signs of a fever. Their fevers should disappear without the use of fever-reducing medications. If appropriate for the job, employers might consider having telecommuting options for those who need to stay home. Encourage employees to avoid touching their eyes, noses or mouths; and to wash their hands before and after eating, after using the bathroom, and any time hands are soiled. If a workplace lacks soap and water, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol is a good substitute. Good hand hygiene is the best protection against infection and should always be practiced after contact with frequently-touched surfaces or other people's hands.

Employers should review sick leave policies to determine whether policies are up to date and adequate to address employee questions and potential absences. Employees should review sick leave policies and be familiar with their employers' policies for handling absences prompted by illness or the need to care for household members who are sick.

Should workers wear masks to prevent the spread of the H1N1 flu?

Workers in general workplace settings (offices, stores, restaurants, manufacturing plants) do not need to wear masks. Any worker with symptoms of flu-like illness (fever plus cough or sore throat) should stay home until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100°F/37.8°C) or signs of a fever. Their fevers should disappear without the use of fever-reducing medications. For healthcare workers, mask and respirator guidance is posted at <http://www.health.ri.gov/pandemicflu/swineflu/provider.php>

What precautions can help prevent the spread of the H1N1 influenza in offices and public places?

Keep hand-washing facilities supplied with soap and paper towels, and clean them regularly. Keep sinks, faucets, drains, toilets and plumbing in good working order. Provide tissues, wastebaskets and a place to wash or disinfect hands for employees and the public. Routinely clean frequently-touched surfaces such as doorknobs, door handles, common keyboards, handrails and telephones, as well as surfaces in bathrooms, cafeterias, and offices. Post signs advising employees and visitors to wash their hands frequently and to cover their coughs. Find resources at: <http://www.cdc.gov/germstopper/materials.htm>

What should I use to clean surfaces?

The H1N1 virus can be killed with common household or commercial detergents and disinfectants. Use general household cleaners or soap and water on frequently-touched surfaces.

Additional information on registered disinfectants and antimicrobial products is available at www.epa.gov/oppad001/influenza-disinfectants.html

Should workers take precautions when cleaning?

Workplace safety and health programs should train all cleaning staff on the safe use of cleaning and disinfectant products. Workers should wear gloves as instructed when mixing or spraying cleaning products, and remove their gloves when moving from one work area to the next.

Workers who handle potentially contaminated items (trash, tissues, etc.) should wear gloves. Workers should be reminded to wash their hands after using cleaning products or touching contaminated surfaces or items.

What should I tell employees who have flu-like symptoms?

Employees with flu-like symptoms (fever and cough or fever and sore throat), should stay home until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever (100°F/37.8°C) or signs of a fever. Their fevers should disappear without the use of fever-reducing medications. Anyone with *severe* symptoms should seek treatment immediately. In adults, symptoms that warrant emergency medical attention include: rapid breathing, difficulty breathing, or shortness of breath, pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen, sudden dizziness, confusion, severe or persistent vomiting, and bluish skin color. Those with mild flu-like illness should *not* go to the emergency room or hospital. Those with flu-like illness who have underlying and/or complicating medical conditions (such as heart or lung disease, diabetes, pregnancy or immunocompromised) should call their doctor.

Should employees with influenza-like illness get tested when they get sick or before returning to work?

No. There is no need for people with mild flu symptoms to be tested for flu or for the H1N1 virus. Testing does not affect treatment or medical advice. Employees who are feeling well can return to work 24 hours after they are free of fever (100°F/37.8°C) or signs of a fever. Their fevers should disappear without the use of fever-reducing medications. There is no need to test them for an absence of influenza.

Should companies restrict business travel to prevent H1N1 influenza?

It is not necessary to restrict business travel at this time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has downgraded its recommendation against travel to Mexico to a Travel Health Precaution. For more information see:

<http://www.health.rh.gov/pandemicflu/swineflu/TravelAdvisory/TravelPolicy051909.pdf>

When should I close down my office?

Thus far there has been no need for U.S. employers to close businesses or offices to prevent the spread of swine flu.

How can I plan for the long term?

Think about how you would run your business if a large share of your workforce were absent. Consider the impact that school closures could have and make contingency plans, such as allowing telecommuting or staggered shifts. You should also review your sick-leave policies and consider how they would affect employees who become ill. For more information on how businesses can plan for large disease outbreaks, visit www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/workplaceplanning/index.html

Additional Resources

HEALTH website - <http://www.health.rh.gov/pandemicflu/swineflu/swineflu.php>

CDC – Workplace Guidance - <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/guidance/workplace.htm>